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ABSTRACT

A writing teacher, troubled by the hierarchical, authoritarian design of his courses, restructured his writing classes to alter the dynamics of authority in the classroom. The idea was rooted both in Paulo Freire's writings and in the simple notion that students should be designing their own writing tasks. First, students brainstormed possible themes for their magazines. Then they divided up into editorial boards, within which they collaborated, first, in soliciting articles from other class members and, next, in designing, composing, and editing their magazines. In doing so each student fulfilled two roles: writer and critical reader. The teacher was left to coach and, through contractual grading, to keep track of students' progress. The results of this "publication workshop" approach were positive as students took delight in choosing their topics, approached the tasks of writing and editing with new energy, produced a fine final product, and even embraced topics such as race, class and gender without the coercion of their teacher. In a survey circulated among the program initiator's colleagures it was found, interestingly enough, that this approach, usually branded as "leftist" by teachers who still employed the old authoritarian methods, was also branded as "rightist" since, with no explicit reference to race, class, or gender, it lacked the requisite credentials of a leftist agenda. Other teachers felt that the workshop approach did not allow for the inclusion of materials and lessons which they deemed to be important. Despite the lack of trust that was revealed in many answers, and despite evidence that human beings generally do not really want to share authority, the publications workshop provides an opportunity to share power and experience such a model as the norm and as a reminder that oppression shall never be overcome by modeling oppression. (PRA)

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With Fits and Starts:
How collaborative learning fares in the hierarchical, authoritarian university
(Presented by Bruce Maylath at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Boston, Massachusetts, 21 March 1991).

When the 1980's began, we heard a lot about new ways of sharing power. Forecasters like Alvin Toffler and John Naisbitt told us in their books *The Third Wave* and *Megatrends* that industrial societies approaching the next century would soon reorganize themselves, abolishing traditional hierarchies of power in favor of egalitarian networks and matrices. Indeed, they said, this trend could already be spotted in up-and- coming companies like Apple, a firm contrasting sharply with its button-down, old-line, authoritarian competitor IBM. Those of us in educational establishments cheered when we read this. Education has, after all, been the longtime laboratory for experiments in evening out the disparities rampant in English-speaking societies.

For many years as a teacher of writing, I was troubled by the hierarchical, authoritarian design of my own courses. Perpetually, students seemed to be trying to figure out what I wanted them to say rather than exploring their own best thoughts and developing their own voices of authority. Despite many attempts at minor adjustments, all with the intent of suppressing my role as authority, I simply couldn't seem to get the situation to change. I was, to use the words of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, a captive of "the banking concept of education," in which I was the depositor of knowledge and the students were the receptacles.

Over time, however, especially as I became more familiar with Freire's writings, an idea for reform kept growing in my mind, an idea that would radically alter the dynamics of authority in my classrooms. The idea was rooted in the simple notion that students should be designing their own writing tasks; I shouldn't be designing and assigning them for them. That part sounded easy enough. The hard part would be constructing an arrangement for the course in which students would find it natural to decide for themselves what they wanted to write about. The arrangement, I concluded, had to incorporate collaborative learning. Indeed, I was becoming more and more convinced that anything I did must solve what Freire calls the "teacher-student contradiction"(59). His solution is for teachers and students to become both, teacher/student, simultaneously. Somehow, I knew, I had to make this happen.

Soon after I arrived at Minnesota, my scheme had evolved into a feasible framework. Recalling my days teaching English in high schools, I remembered the pride with which students in woodshop classes at the end of the semester would show off their handiwork to their friends, their parents, me, their other teachers--anybody willing to take a moment to look and share their glee. Even at the time I remember thinking, "There ought to be a way for this to happen in English, too." Ten years later I had the solution. I surmised that learning would achieve its own momentum when students were given the opportunity to create their own tangible product. Under such circumstances, learning is catalyzed by the power of play. At its best, the play leads to a product in which its creators feel ownership and take pride. Successfully implemented the very process of play promotes a range of experiences, tapping the learners' collective knowledge and skill. My role would be converted, if not reduced, to that of an insightful mentor--a coach who could bring learners to a critical consciousness of the theoretical framework supporting their product, namely by helping them define the purpose and audience of their writing through an editorial process in which they were the editors of *their own publications*.

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Here's how it worked: First, students would brainstorm possible themes for their magazines. (If you hear some more echoes of Freire in this, you've heard right. "Life is made meaningful through themes," writes Freire [99]). Then the students divide up into editorial boards, within which they collaborate, first, in soliciting articles from other class members and, next, in designing, composing, and editing their magazines. In so doing, each student fills two roles: writer and critical reader. The teacher is left to coach and, through contractual grading, keep track of the students' progress.

The results of this approach, as evidenced in my students' writing, exceeded my expectations. With a product of their own creation as their goal, most students took delight in choosing their own topics to write about. Perhaps more important, they approached the task of revising and editing with an energy that I had never seen in classes organized around conventional conference or peer editing groups alone. The final form of their publications exceeded my expectations, too, entirely a consequence, I believe, of my removing myself as the depositor of knowledge and arranging for the students to collaborate deciding upon and shaping their own topics, themes, and magazines.

After a couple quarters, with tangible success in hand (including adapting the approach to specialized writing courses for upper-division students), I began showing my colleagues what my students had done and answered their questions about how a Publications Workshop operates. The magazines themselves elicited excitement and approval, but the student-centered design for authority that catalyzed the magazines into being seemed to upset several teachers on both the political right and left. That it upset those on the right didn't surprise me. The scheme was, after all, rooted in Freirean pedagogy. No doubt we have all seen colleagues who, glorying in their role as authority on a subject, believe it is also their perogative to exercise authority over what students may choose to write about. The student-controlled editorial boards of the Publications Workshop were of course a threat to their traditional authority and their place at the top of the hierarchy.

More startling to me were the reactions from the left. "Do you make your students write about race, class, and gender?" asked one instructor. "If you let students write whatever they want, they won't ever choose those topics," she said. Her statement didn't match my experience, since several students had indeed chosen to examine issues of race, class, and gender. Since then, in fact, several instructors using the Publications Approach have had students devote entire magazines to such subjects. If she meant that many students would choose other topics to write about, she was indeed right. By no means were these students unexposed to the issues, however, since they read and help revise articles as they pass across their editorial desks and later receive the finished articles between the covers of a publication. My colleague's comment proved revealing. In her own worthy attempts to expunge discrimination based on race, sex, and class, she was willing--indeed, eager--to impose her own interests, her own demands, her own control on her students, not trusting them to develop their writing abilities by their taking control over their own ideas, their own processes, their own products. As I talked with her further, she used phrases like, "I force my students to read..." and "I make them consider...." and remembered having used those phrases myself when once upon a time I had arranged my courses along the pedagogical lines of the traditional, hierarchical, authoritarian university. How coercive and insidious the authoritarian classroom is, no matter what the instructor's politics and good intentions. The comments by my colleague on the left reminded me more and more of another passage from Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. "Unfortunately," Freire writes, "those who espouse the cause of liberation are themselves surrounded and influenced by the climate which generates the banking concept, and often do not perceive its true significance or its dehumanizing power. Paradoxically, then, they utilize this same instrument of

alienation in what they consider an effort to liberate. Indeed, some 'revolutionaries' brand as 'innocents,' 'dreamers,' or even 'reactionaries' those who would challenge this educational practice. *But one does not liberate men by alienating them*" (66). (As you've no doubt noted, the Brazilian Freire still used sexist language when he wrote his book in the late sixties).

My colleague's approach was hardly solitary. Many of our staff's 123 instructors have designed courses with quarter-long assignments examining race, class, or gender, many to good effect. As a way of introducing these designs, as well as others, to new instructors, our director of freshman writing, Robert Brown, Jr., invited six experienced instructors, including myself, to present our approaches at the annual fall training in 1989. Four of the approaches emphasized race, class, or gender issues. One was a (now traditional) process approach, and the sixth was the Publications Workshop. Each approach attracted new adherents as the training went on, including four new instructors interested in the Publications Workshop. At the training's conclusion, the director, as gentle and supporting a professor as can be found, ambled over to chat with me about how training had gone. At the end of our conversation he said, "I was glad the trainees got to hear about your Publications Approach. It represented well the right." I was stunned--too stunned even to respond. Concerned about oppression in the classroom, I thought I had devised a truly liberating, progressive, Freirean approach to teaching writing. Indeed, the negative reactions I had gotten from conservatives served to confirm my notion. But to the director of freshman writing, who describes himself as a non-programmatic Marxist, the Publications Workshop, without any explicit reference to race, class, or gender, lacked the requisite credentials of a leftist agenda, therefore placing the approach to the right of center. As Freire had warned, I was now labeled a reactionary.

That didn't prevent instructors from being attracted to the Publications Approach, however. Thirteen instructors in our program are now using the approach in their composition courses. In addition, an instructor in the Lingusitics Dept. has adapted the approach to her English as a Second Language courses, and a professor at Mankato State University has seen fit to appropriate the approach. Moreover, as a result of Minnesota's College in the Schools program several high school teachers have modified the approach to match the demands of their secondary classrooms.

The instructors now teaching Publications Workshops within our Composition Program have, like me, been curious about how widespread the perception is that our pedagogy is an instrument of the right. Indeed, all members of this group consider their politics liberal, several are adamant feminists, and more than one has actively supported causes that the American mainstream labels leftist. To get at the question, we prepared a survey, one of whose parts was a political continuum on which the respondents could place the politics behind the Publications Approach. Of 123 instructors, 22 responded. Of these, nine placed the approach to the left of center, all of these between 1/3 and 2/3 of the way to the most extreme end. Two ranked it dead center, and one marked it just barely to the right of center. The remaining 10, interestingly enough, refused to mark anything, adding comments such as "What?" or "Why are you asking?" or "This is a silly scale." One decliner commented that the instructors using the approach consider themselves on the left but their underlying motives are conservative. Perhaps more revealing were responses to the other questions. Of particular note, 15 of the 22 respondents agreed that they were intrigued by the way the Publications Workshop attempts to eliminate the traditional, authoritarian hierarchy of the university and the classroom. However, 10 (and I have no way of knowing whether this was the remaining 10) checked the response that said "The Publications Workshop appears not to provide an opportunity to

include material and lessons that I deem important."

The number marking this response surprised the surveyors. We have always found that even with the time that magazine production takes, there is always ample time to include other activities and instruction. Perhaps the 10 that checked off this answer are indeed the 10 who were not intrigued with the Workshop's attempt to eliminate the traditional, authoritarian hierarchy of the classroom. My fear is that these are the instructors who are most ardently pushing the agenda of revolution on their students, oppressing them in ways not dissimilar to the very oppression they decry. Most disturbing is their lack of trust in students.

Again, I'm reminded of Freire, who writes, "Certain members of the oppressor class join the oppressed in their struggle for liberation... It happens, however, that as they cease to be exploiters or indifferent spectators or simply the heirs of exploitation and move to the side of the exploited, they almost always bring with them the marks of their origin: their prejudices and their deformations, which include a lack of confidence in the people's ability to think, to want, and to know...our converts...truly desire to transform the unjust order; but because of their background they believe that they must be the executors of the transformation. They talk about the people, but they do not trust them; and trusting the people is an indispensable precondition for revolutionary change. A real humanist can be identified more by his trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favor without that trust" (46-47).

Interestingly, about the same time the survey came out, I was at a meeting of our program's Composition Research Group, seated next to the director of freshman writing. Somehow course design came up. A year and a half after his earlier comment, Prof. Brown said, "You know, I've been thinking, of all the course designs we have in our program, the only one that really sweeps aside all the teacher as authority business is the Publications Workshop. It centers the entire locus of responsibility in the students." I was nearly as stunned to hear his reevaluation as I was to hear his original statement.

But perhaps our attraction to hierarchies and authority shouldn't surprise us. During all the changes that have taken place during the last two years, I've been struck by peoples' yearning for the type of control they've known for centures. You may remember that during the army movements to put down the Tiananmen Square protests in China, reports surfaced of generals operating along the lines of ancient Chinese war lords. Hadn't the Communists erased any memory of that part of Chinese history? More recently we've seen protestors in Russia holding aloft the old imperial tricolor and portraits of the family of the Czar. Some even call for the heir of the Czar to return as ruler. And this in a country where the government has made every attempt to expose the excesses of imperial power. Ironically, not one of the protestors is even old enough to remember czarist rule personally. This year we see Americans once again in their history cheering victorious generals leading the most entrenched of all hierarchies, the military. Do human beings really want to share authority?

I'm convinced they do when they've had repeated opportunities to share power and experience such a model as the norm. That's what the Publications Workshop provides, reminding us as it does that we shall never overcome oppression by modeling oppression.

Work Cited

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1970.